

# And the War Came

## Ralph Raico

The immediate origins of the 1914 war lie in the twisted politics of the Kingdom of Serbia.<sup>[1]</sup> In June, 1903, Serbian army officers murdered their king and queen in the palace and threw their bodies out a window, at the same time massacring various royal relations, cabinet ministers, and members of the palace guards. It was an act that horrified and disgusted many in the civilized world. The military clique replaced the pro-Austrian Obrenović dynasty with the anti-Austrian Karađorđevićs. The new government pursued a pro-Russian, Pan-Slavist policy, and a network of secret societies sprang up, closely linked to the government, whose goal was the "liberation" of the Serb subjects of Austria (and Turkey), and perhaps the other South Slavs as well.

The man who became prime minister, Nicolas Pašić, aimed at the creation of a Greater Serbia, necessarily at the expense of Austria-Hungary. The Austrians felt, correctly, that the cession of their Serb-inhabited lands, and maybe even the lands inhabited by the other South Slavs, would set off the unraveling of the great multinational Empire. For Austria-Hungary, Serbian designs posed a mortal danger.

The Russian ambassador Hartwig worked closely with Pašić and cultivated connections with some of the secret societies. The upshot of the two Balkan Wars which he promoted was that Serbia more than doubled in size and threatened Austria-Hungary not only politically but militarily as well. Sazonov, the Russian Foreign Minister, wrote to Hartwig, "Serbia has only gone through the first stage of her historic road and for the attainment of her goal must still endure a terrible struggle in which her whole existence may be at stake." Sazonov went on, as indicated above, to direct Serbian expansion to the lands of Austria-Hungary, for which Serbia would have to wage "the future inevitable struggle."<sup>[2]</sup> The nationalist societies stepped up their activities, not only within Serbia, but also in the Austrian provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The most radical of these groups was Union or Death, popularly known as the Black Hand. It was led by Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijević, called Apis, who also happened to be the head of Royal Serbian Military Intelligence. Apis was a veteran of the slaughter of his own king and queen in 1903, as well as of a number of other political murder plots. "He was quite possibly the foremost European expert in regicide of his time."<sup>[3]</sup> One of his close contacts was Colonel Artamonov, the Russian military attaché in Belgrade.

The venerable emperor of Austria and king of Hungary, Franz Josef, who had come to the throne in 1848, clearly had not much longer to live. His nephew and heir, Franz Ferdinand, was profoundly concerned by the wrenching ethnic problems of the Empire and sought their solution in some great structural reform, either in the direction of federalism for the various national groups, or else "trialism," the creation of a third, Slavic component of the Empire, alongside the Germans and the Magyars. Since such a concession would mean the ruin of any program for a Greater Serbia, Franz Ferdinand was a natural target for assassination by the Black Hand.<sup>[4]</sup>



*Kaiser Wilhelm II(left) and Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria(right) in a car, 1912. The military airship "Parseval" (probably either PL 2/P. I or PL 4/M I) is on the left, and the Zeppelin on the right\}. This is an early example of photo fakery. Photographer Oscar Tellgmann added the airships to his photo. Bundesarchiv, Bild 136-B0435 / Tellgmann, Oscar / CC-BY-SA [Public domain or CC-BY-SA-3.0-de (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de/deed.en>)], via Wikimedia Commons.*

In the spring of 1914, Serbian nationals who were agents of the Black Hand recruited a team of young Bosnian fanatics for the job. The youths were trained in Belgrade and provided with guns, bombs, guides (also Serbian nationals) to help them cross the border, and cyanide for after their mission was accomplished. Prime Minister Pašić learned of the plot, informed his cabinet, and made ineffectual attempts to halt it, including conveying a veiled, virtually meaningless warning to an Austrian official in Vienna. (It is also likely that the Russian attaché Artamonov knew of the plot. [\[5\]](#)) No clear message of the sort that might have prevented the assassination was forwarded to the Austrians. On June 28, 1914,

the plot proved a brilliant success, as 19 year old Gavrilo Princip shot and killed Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie in the streets of Sarajevo.

In Serbia, Princip was instantly hailed as a hero, as he was also in post-World War I Yugoslavia, where the anniversary of the murders was celebrated as a national and religious holiday. A marble tablet was dedicated at the house in front of which the killings took place. It was inscribed: "On this historic spot, on 28 June 1914, Gavrilo Princip proclaimed freedom."<sup>[6]</sup> In his history of the First World War, Winston Churchill wrote of Princip that "he died in prison, and a monument erected in recent years by his fellow-countrymen records his infamy, and their own."<sup>[7]</sup>

In Vienna, in that summer of 1914, the prevalent mood was much less Belgrade's celebration of the deed than Churchill's angry contempt. This atrocity was the sixth in less than four years and strong evidence of the worsening Serbian danger, leading the Austrians to conclude that the continued existence of an expansionist Serbia posed an unacceptable threat to the Habsburg monarchy. An ultimatum would be drawn up containing demands that Serbia would be compelled to reject, giving Austria an excuse to attack. In the end, Serbia would be destroyed, probably divided up among its neighbors (Austria, which did not care to have more disaffected South Slavs as subjects, would most likely abstain from the partition). Obviously, Russia might choose to intervene. However, this was a risk the Austrians were prepared to take, especially after they received a "blank check" from Kaiser Wilhelm to proceed with whatever measures they thought necessary. In the past, German support of Austria had forced the Russians to back down.

Scholars have now available to them the diary of Kurt Riezler, private secretary to the German Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg. From this and other documents it becomes clear that Bethmann Hollweg's position in the July crisis was a complex one. If Austria were to vanish as a power, Germany would be threatened by rampant Pan-Slavism supported by growing Russian power in the east and by French revanchism in the west. By prompting the Austrians to attack Serbia immediately, he hoped that the conflict would be localized and the Serbian menace nullified. The Chancellor, too, understood that the Central Powers were risking a continental war. But he believed that if Austria acted swiftly presenting Europe with "a rapid *fait accompli*," the war could be confined to the Balkans, and "the intervention of third parties [avoided] as much as possible." In this way, the German-Austrian alliance could emerge with a stunning political victory that might split the Entente and crack Germany's "encirclement."<sup>[8]</sup>

But the Austrians procrastinated, and the ultimatum was delivered to Serbia only on July 23. When Sazonov, in St. Petersburg, read it, he burst out: "*C'est la guerre européenne!*" – "It is the European war!" The Russians felt they could not leave Serbia once again in the lurch, after having failed to prevent the Austrian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina or to obtain a seaport for Serbia after the Second Balkan War. Sazonov told a cabinet meeting on July 24 that abandoning Serbia would mean betraying Russia's "historic mission" as the protector of the South Slavs, and also reduce Russia to the rank of a second-rate power.<sup>[9]</sup>

On July 25, the Russian leaders decided to institute what was known in their plans as "The period preparatory to war," the prelude to all-out mobilization. Directed against both of the Central Powers, this "set in train a whole succession of military measures along the Austrian and German frontiers."<sup>[10]</sup> Back in the 1920s, Sidney Fay had already cited the testimony of a Serbian military officer, who, in traveling from Germany to Russia on July 28, found no military measures underway on

the German side of the border, while in Russian Poland "mobilization steps [were] being taken on a grand scale." "These secret 'preparatory measures,'" commented Fay, "enabled Russia, when war came, to surprise the world by the rapidity with which she poured her troops into East Prussia and Galicia."[\[11\]](#) In Paris, too, the military chiefs began taking preliminary steps to general mobilization as early as July 25.[\[12\]](#)

On July 28, Austria declared war on Serbia. The French ambassador in St. Petersburg, Maurice Paléologue, most likely with the support of Poincaré, urged the Russians on to intransigence and general mobilization. In any case, Poincaré had given the Russians their own "blank check" in 1912, when he assured them that "if Germany supported Austria [in the Balkans], France would march."[\[13\]](#) Following the (rather ineffectual) Austrian bombardment of Belgrade, the Tsar was finally persuaded on July 30 to authorize general mobilization, to the delight of the Russian generals (the decree was momentarily reversed, but then confirmed, finally). Nicholas II had no doubt as to what that meant: "Think of what awful responsibility you are advising me to take! Think of the thousands and thousands of men who will be sent to their deaths!"[\[14\]](#) In a very few years the Tsar himself, his family, and his servants would be shot to death by the Bolsheviks.

What had gone wrong? James Joll wrote, "The Austrians had believed that vigorous action against Serbia and a promise of German support would deter Russia; the Russians had believed that a show of strength against Austria would both check the Austrians and deter Germany. In both cases, the bluff had been called."[\[15\]](#) Russia – and, through its support of Russia, France – as well as Austria and Germany, was quite willing to risk war in July, 1914.

As the conflict appeared more and more inevitable, in all the capitals the generals clamored for their contingency plans to be put into play. The best-known was the Schlieffen Plan, drawn up some years before, which governed German strategy in case of a two-front war. It called for concentrating forces against France for a quick victory in the west, and then transporting the bulk of the army to the eastern front via the excellent German railway system, to meet and vanquish the slow-moving (it was assumed) Russians. Faced with Russian mobilization and the evident intention of attacking Austria, the Germans activated the Schlieffen Plan. It was, as Sazonov had cried out, the European War.[\[16\]](#)

On July 31, the French cabinet, acceding to the demand of the head of the army, General Joffre, authorized general mobilization. The next day, the German ambassador to St. Petersburg, Portalès, called on the Russian Foreign Minister. After asking him four times whether Russia would cancel mobilization and receiving each time a negative reply, Portalès presented Sazonov with Germany's declaration of war. The German ultimatum to France was a formality. On August 3, Germany declared war on France as well.[\[17\]](#)

The question of "war-guilt" has been endlessly agitated.[\[18\]](#) It can be stated with assurance that Fischer and his followers have in no way proven their case. That, for instance, Helmut Moltke, head of the German Army, like Conrad, his counterpart in Vienna, pressed for a preventive war has long been known. But both military chieftains were kept in check by their superiors. In any case, there is no evidence whatsoever that Germany in 1914 deliberately unleashed a European war which it had been preparing for years – no evidence in the diplomatic and internal political documents, in the military planning, in the activities of the intelligence agencies, or in the relations between the German and Austrian General Staffs.[\[19\]](#)

Karl Dietrich Erdmann, put the issue well:

*"Peace could have been preserved in 1914, had Berchtold, Sazonov, Bethmann-Hollweg, Poincaré, [British Foreign Secretary] Grey, or one of the governments concerned, so sincerely wanted it that they were willing to sacrifice certain political ideas, traditions, and conceptions, which were not their own personal ones, but those of their peoples and their times."* [20]

This sober judgment throws light on the faulty assumptions of sympathizers with the Fischer approach. John W. Langdon, for instance, concedes that any Russian mobilization "would have required an escalatory response from Germany." He adds, however, that to expect Russia not to mobilize "when faced with an apparent Austrian determination to undermine Serbian sovereignty and alter the Balkan power balance was to expect the impossible." Thus, Langdon exculpates Russia because Austria "seemed bent on a course of action clearly opposed to Russian interests in eastern Europe." [21] True enough – but Russia "seemed bent" on using Serbia to oppose Austrian interests (the Austrian interest in survival), and France "seemed bent" on giving full support to Russia, and so on. This is what historians meant when they spoke of shared responsibility for the onset of the First World War.

Britain still has to be accounted for. With the climax of the crisis, Prime Minister Asquith and Foreign Secretary Edward Grey were in a quandary. While the *Entente cordiale* was not a formal alliance, secret military conversations between the general staffs of the two nations had created certain expectations and even definite obligations. Yet, aside from high military circles and, of course, the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, no one in Britain was rabid for war. Luckily for the British leaders, the Germans came to their rescue. The success of the attack on France that was the linchpin of the Schlieffen Plan depended above all on speed. This could only be achieved, it was thought, by infringing the neutrality of Belgium. "The obligation to defend Belgian neutrality was incumbent on all the signatories to the 1839 treaty *acting collectively*, and this had been the view adopted by the [British] cabinet only a few days previously. But now Britain presented itself as Belgium's sole guarantor" (emphasis added). [22] Ignoring (or perhaps ignorant of) the crucial precondition of collective action among the guarantors, and with the felicity of expression customary among German statesmen of his time, Bethmann Hollweg labeled the Belgian neutrality treaty "a scrap of paper." [23] Grey, addressing the House of Commons, referred to the invasion of Belgium as "the direst crime that ever stained the pages of history." [24]

The violation of non-belligerent Belgium's territory, though deplorable, was scarcely unprecedented in the annals of great powers. In 1807, units of the British navy entered Copenhagen harbor, bombarded the city, and seized the Danish fleet. At the time, Britain was at peace with Denmark, which was a neutral in the Napoleonic wars. The British claimed that Napoleon was about to invade Denmark and seize the fleet himself. As they explained in a manifesto to the people of Copenhagen, Britain was acting not only for its own survival but for the freedom of all peoples.

As the German navy grew in strength, calls were heard in Britain "to Copenhagen" the German fleet, from Sir John Fischer, First Sea Lord, and even from Arthur Lee, First Lord of the Admiralty. They were rejected, and England took the path of outbuilding the Germans in the naval arms race. But the willingness of high British authorities to act without scruple on behalf of perceived vital national interests did not go unnoticed in Germany. [25] When the time came, the Germans acted harshly towards neutral Belgium, though sparing the Belgians lectures on the freedom of mankind. Ironically, by

1916, the king of Greece was protesting the seizure of Greek territories by the Allies; like Belgium, the neutrality of Corfu had been guaranteed by the powers. His protests went unheeded.<sup>[26]</sup>

The invasion of Belgium was merely a pretext for London.<sup>[27]</sup> This was clear to John Morley, as he witnessed the machinations of Grey and the war party in the cabinet. In the last act of authentic English liberalism, Lord Morley, biographer of Cobden and Gladstone and author of the tract, *On Compromise*, upholding moral principles in politics, handed in his resignation.<sup>[28]</sup>

Britain's entry into the war was crucial. In more ways than one, it sealed the fate of the Central Powers. Without Britain in the war, the United States would never have gone in.

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#### Notes:

- [1] For this discussion, see especially Luigi Albertini, *The Origins of the War of 1914*, Isabella M. Massey, trans. (Westport, Conn: Greenwood, 1980 [1952]), 3 vols., Vol. 2, pp. 1-119; and Joachim Remak, *Sarajevo, the Story of a Political Murder*, (New York: Criterion, 1959) pp. 43-78 and passim.
- [2] Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 1, p. 486.
- [3] Remak, *Sarajevo*, p. 50.
- [4] Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, p. 17: "among Serb nationalists and the Southern Slavs who drew their inspiration from Belgrade he was regarded as their worst enemy."
- [5] *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 86.
- [6] *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 47 n. 2. A Yugoslav historian of the crime, Vladimir Dedijer, strongly sympathized with the assassins, who in his view committed an act of "tyrannicide," "for the common good, on the basis of the teachings of natural law." See his *The Road to Sarajevo* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966), p. 446.
- [7] Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis*, vol. 6 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p. 54.
- [8] Konrad H. Jarausch, "The Illusion of Limited War: Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg's Calculated Risk, July 1914," *Central European History*, vol. 2, no. 1 (March 1969), pp. 60–61; L. C. F. Turner, *Origins of the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 98; also Laurence Lafore, *The Long Fuse: An Interpretation of the Origins of World War I*, 2nd ed. (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1971), p. 217: "it was hoped and expected that no general European complications would follow, but if they did, Germany was prepared to face them."
- [9] Joachim Remak, *The Origins of World War I, 1871–1914*, 2nd ed. (Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt, Brace, 1995), p. 135.
- [10] L. C. F. Turner, "The Russian Mobilization in 1914," *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 3, no. 1 (January 1968), pp. 75–76.



- [11] Sidney B. Fay, *The Origins of the World War*, 2 vols. (New York: Free Press, 1966 [1928]), vol. 2, p. 321 n. 98.
- [12] L. C. F. Turner, "Russian Mobilization," *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 3, no. 1 (January 1968), p. 82. By 1914 the French general staff had grown optimistic about the outcome of a war with Germany. With the French army strengthened and Russian support guaranteed, in French military circles, as in German, "there was a sense that if war was to come to Europe, better now ... than later." Hew Strachan, *The First World War*, vol. 1, *To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 93.
- [13] Albertini, *Origins*, vol. 2, pp. 587–89, vol. 3, pp. 80–85; Turner, *Origins*, p. 41.
- [14] Turner, "Russian Mobilization," pp. 85–86, Turner described this as "perhaps the most important decision taken in the history of Imperial Russia."
- [15] James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, 2nd ed. (Longman: London, 1992), p. 23, also pp. 125–26.
- [16] L. C. F. Turner, "The Significance of the Schlieffen Plan," in Paul M. Kennedy, ed., *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880–1914* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979), pp. 199–221.
- [17] S. L. A. Marshall, *World War I* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), pp. 39–42
- [18] See Remak, *Origins*, pp. 132–41 for a fairly persuasive allocation of "national responsibility."
- [19] Egmont Zechlin, "July 1914: Reply to a Polemic," in H. W. Koch, ed., *The Origins of the First World War: Great Power Rivalries and German War Aims*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 371–85. Geiss, for instance, in *German Foreign Policy 1871-1914*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 142–45, wildly misinterpreted the meaning of the German "war council" of December 8, 1912, when he painted it as the initiation of the "plan" that was finally realized with Germany's "unleashing" of war in 1914. See Erwin Hölzle, *Die Entmachtung Europas: Das Experiment des Friedens vor und im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1975), pp. 178–83; also H. W. Koch, ed., *The Origins of the First World War: Great Power Rivalries and German War Aims*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1984), "Introduction," pp. 12–13; and Turner, *Origins*, p. 49. See also the important article by Ulrich Trumpener, "War Premeditated? German Intelligence Operations in July 1914," *Central European History*, vol. 9, no. 1 (March 1976), pp. 58–85. Among Trumpener's findings are that there is no evidence of "any significant changes in the sleepy routine" of the German General Staff even after the German "blank check" to Austria, and that the actions of the German military chiefs until the last week of July suggest that, though war with Russia was considered a possibility, it was regarded as "not really all that likely" (Moltke, as well as the head of military intelligence, did not return to Berlin from their vacations until July 25).
- [20] Karl Dietrich Erdmann, "War Guilt 1914 Reconsidered: A Balance of New Research," in Koch, ed., *The Origins of the First World War*, p. 369.

- [21] John W. Langdon, *July 1914: The Long Debate, 1918–1990* (New York: Berg, 1991), p. 181, emphasis in original.
- [22] Strachan, *The First World War. To Arms*, p. 97.
- [23] What Bethmann Hollweg actually told the British ambassador was somewhat less shocking: "Can this neutrality which we violate only out of necessity, fighting for our very existence ... really provide the reason for a world war? Compared to the disaster of such a holocaust does not the significance of this neutrality dwindle into a scrap of paper?" Jaraus, "The Illusion of Limited War," p. 71.
- [24] S. L. A. Marshall, *World War I* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), p. 52.
- [25] Jonathan Steinberg, "The Copenhagen Complex," *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 1, no. 3 (July 1966), pp. 23–46.
- [26] H. C. Peterson, *Propaganda for War: The Campaign against American Neutrality, 1914–1917* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), pp. 45–46.
- [27] Joll, *Origins*, p. 115, attributed Grey's lying to the public and to Parliament to the British democratic system, which "forces ministers to be devious and disingenuous." Joll added that more recent examples were Franklin Roosevelt in 1939–41 and Lyndon Johnson in the Vietnam War. A democratic leader "who is himself convinced that circumstances demand entry into a war, often has to conceal what he is doing from those who have elected him."
- [28] John Morley, *Memorandum on Resignation* (New York: Macmillan, 1928). In the discussions before the fateful decision was taken, Lord Morley challenged the cabinet: "Have you ever thought what will happen if Russia wins?" Tsarist Russia "will emerge pre-eminent in Europe." Lloyd George admitted that he had never thought of that.

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